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Chapter 1

Misgivings about Goffman
- Social structure, power and politics in the work of Erving Goffman

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to excavate and explore some of the critical potential in the work of Erving Goffman. Even though Goffman is often depicted as an apolitical microsociologist with no genuine understanding of power or social conflict, this chapter critically engages with some of these misgivings about Goffman. This is done through an outlining of his perspective on topics such as social structure, power and politics. It is shown that Goffman in fact does touch upon these issues in his work on the 'interaction order' with its focus on face-to-face interaction and interaction rituals either explicitly or more implicitly. The chapter concludes that although Goffman did neither pay any particular nor any sustained attention to such topics (at least not compared to many other sociologists writing during his time), he nevertheless provided the discipline of sociology with some insights into the themes of social structure, power and politics that subsequent interpreters and users of his work have been able to elaborate and expand upon.

Introduction

Erving Goffman is generally regarded as one of the most prominent representatives of interactionism in sociology during the 20th century. Throughout his career, he wrote a number of seminal books and coined numerous important concepts now considered essential constituents of the working vocabulary of the interactionist community. Goffman primarily regarded his own analysis of what he termed the 'interaction order' as a contribution to microsociology, which was concerned with studying and understanding the realm of face-to-face interaction in everyday life settings (Goffman 1983). In this chapter, we discuss some of the criticisms raised against Goffman's microsociological account for apparently neglecting many core concerns in much of sociology such as power, social stratification, social change, culture and social systems, and for providing a so-called 'nice guy' (Billig 2001) and consensual picture of the social world that overlooked issues of social conflict, contestation and dissonance. Often, the overall drift of these lines of criticism is to situate Goffman's sociology as naïve or incomplete or as lacking an adequate sociological awareness. Misgivings about Goffman are

those flaws or omissions or oversights that, state the critics, if rectified would provide a much more satisfactory basis for the sociology linked to his name.

We suggest that while Goffman may indeed deliberately have neglected some of these dimensions in his writings, part of that neglect was justifiable in light of his ambitions to establish the sociology of the interaction order. We contend that Goffman provided an important analytical platform that in combination with other theoretical perspectives spawned a multitude of useful and valuable ideas for addressing the lacunae identified by critics. Reading Goffman on the surface level as well as between the lines, we suggest that his sociology provides a key microsociological resource for many macrosociological concerns.

In this chapter, we thus aim to demonstrate that (1) many of the misgivings about Goffman's sociology are in fact anticipated in various ways in Goffman's own writings and do not have the fatal status that some critics often seem to assume; and (2) that attention to various comments scattered across the corpus of Goffman's writings, together with some of Goffman's own analyses of social life, offers a basis for claiming Goffman as a kind of critical theorist and public sociologist. We end the chapter by briefly noting some of the ways in which Goffman's ideas are being taken forward in contemporary sociological work that indicate the often overlooked critical dimensions and possibilities of the sociology of the interaction order he proposed.

Gouldner's misgivings about Goffman

It was particularly Alvin W. Gouldner's (1970) critique that first gave significant expression to many of the reservations about Goffman's sociology that up until that point had only circulated in seminar rooms and at academic conferences. Certainly, it was one of the earliest and most influential critical commentaries to express the 'misgivings' examined in this chapter. Gouldner's brilliant examination of 'Goffman's dramaturgy' saw it as a 'symptom' of an imminent 'crisis of Western sociology'. In a forceful yet subtle examination, Gouldner's 12-page essay offered a multitude of provocative interpretations of Goffman. Gouldner noted how dramaturgy refused to buy into conventional distinctions and valuations and thus exhibited 'no metaphysics of hierarchy'; how Goffman presented a world whose social cement was 'tact'; and which seem to articulate the experiences of middle class workers in the new service occupations whose numbers had grown significantly since the end of World War II. Gouldner characterized the micro-world described by Goffman as a 'new bourgeois world of 'impression management' … inhabited by anxious other-directed men with sweaty palms, who live in constant fear of exposure by others and of inadvertent self-betrayal' (Gouldner 1970:382).

More importantly, for Gouldner Goffman's dramaturgy 'has no metaphysics of hierarchy … the conventional cultural hierarchies are shattered' – the behaviour of children illuminates that of adults, mental patients manipulate psychiatrists – 'there is no higher and no lower' (Gouldner 1970:379). But the absence of hierarchy is ambiguous: it can imply that Goffman's dramaturgy is against existing hierarchies or it can imply an avoidance of or accommodation to the power differences implied by current stratification arrangements. Gouldner's core objections are thus set out the following way:

> Goffman's is a sociology of 'co-presence' … it is a social theory that dwells on the episodic and sees life only as it is lived in a narrow interpersonal circumference, ahistorical and noninstitutional, an existence beyond history and society, and one which comes alive only in the fluid, transient 'encounter' … Goffman's image of social life is not of firm, well-bounded social structures, but rather of a loosely stranded, criss-crossing, swaying catwalk along which men dart precariously … People are acrobatic actors and gamesmen who have, somehow, become disengaged from social structures and who are growing detached even from culturally standardized roles. They are … individuals 'working the system' for the enhancement of self. Although disengaged or partly alienated from the system, they are not, however rebels against it (Gouldner 1970:379)

To Gouldner, then, Goffman's work oozed of a certain power-blind 'status quoism' since his 'rejection of hierarchy often expresses itself as an avoidance of social stratification and of the importance of power differences, even for concerns that are central to him; thus, it entails an accommodation to existent power arrangements' (Gouldner 1970:379). Some critics, for example T. R. Young (1971), considered this reading of Goffman too pessimistic and suggested that more radical and even liberatory messages could be gleaned from Goffman's work. Others, like Charles Edgley and Ronny E. Turner (1984), considered such complaints about Goffman's 'status quoism' to mistakenly malign an ally of progressive causes. Edgley and Turner thus regard much of Gouldner's and post-Gouldnerian critical commentary to be based on a shoot the messenger fallacy in which Goffman is blamed for the features of society he describes and analyses. Edgley and Turner claim that Goffman's sociology does not give political comfort to the status quo. On the contrary, Goffman's analyses 'simmer with politically astute criticism of the status quo' (Edgley and Turner 1984:36). Structural questions about power and status are transformed into more 'existentially accurate' forms. Goffman (1959:75) early reminded us that 'a status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated'. His sociology seeks to understand how such coherent, articulated conduct

works in interaction. In that way, he can easily be read as transforming old questions about power and inequality 'in a revolutionary way which places people, rather than institutions at the apex of social and political change' (Edgley and Turner 1984:31). Goffman himself refused to address the issues directly, preferring an oblique and humorous response that acknowledged that his sociology 'does not catch at the differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes and can be said to direct attention away from such matters … He who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to provide a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way the people snore' (Goffman 1974:14).

Much of the early debate on Goffman's lack of critical edge was thus inspired by Gouldner's analysis that is infused with a late 1960s political rhetoric that now has lost much of its previous force. More than any other leading sociologist of his generation, Gouldner forged an approach to sociology that saw it as a form of political activism (Chriss 2015). Apparently, Goffman and Gouldner were friends: Gouldner spent parts of the summer of 1964 living in Goffman's house in Berkeley (Chriss 2015:16). In 1974, when Gouldner founded the journal *Theory and Society* (strapline: 'Renewal and Critique in Social Theory'), Goffman served on its advisory board and a little later published his 'institutional reflexivity' theory of gender relations there (Goffman 1977). James J. Chriss (2015) suggests that political differences lay at the heart of Gouldner's critique of Goffman and other interactionist sociologists. Certainly, Goffman found humour a useful device to distance himself from taking Gouldner's criticisms too seriously. These misgivings first articulated by Gouldner have shaped many of the subsequent debates and provide the main themes for our chapter's discussion of some of the major criticisms of Goffman's enterprise.

Goffman's 'microsociology': what about the macro social structure?
Unlike, say, some positions associated with ethnomethodology, Goffman never explicitly queries the existence or reality of conventional conceptions of culture and social structure. However, he does insist on the distinctiveness of his concerns with the interaction order and the ways in which these concerns differ from much accepted sociology. Often the imagery Goffman uses is of the interaction order as a relatively closed system. Undoubtedly, some of his substantial stints of fieldwork – in the Shetland Islands, at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington DC and in the casinos of Las Vegas – were research sites ('social establishments') with clear physical boundaries that marked off the social actions they contained from wider society. Especially in Goffman's publications in the late 1950s and early 1960s there is

a tendency for him to write of society's influence on interactional conduct in a strongly Durkheimian manner.

Sociology is conventionally and somewhat artificially divided between those who study large-scale social phenomena (such as the origins of capitalist society, the major economic, social and political institutions of entire societies or the development of world systems), who are often called the 'macrosociologists', and then those who study social life as it is directly experienced by persons (such as the workings of small groups, the display and recognition of identities or the structures of conversational interaction), who are often called the 'microsociologists'. Scale seemingly distinguishes microsociology from macrosociology. A fleeting exchange between two persons is of interest to microsociology while macrosociology, as Arthur Stinchcombe (1985:572) once memorably put it, 'is sociology about millions of people'. The sociological tradition has tended to identify with the macrosociological. Microsciological concerns are often dismissed as 'social psychology'. So it is perhaps no surprise that Goffman's single-minded pursuit of a microsociology of the interaction order (Goffman 1953, 1983) could sometimes provoke exasperation from critics unable to see its point. For example, in a 1972 review in *The Sunday Times*, Goffman's then-newest book was greeted as 'a tome about 'the realm of activity that is generated by face-to-face interaction and organized by norms of co-mingling' – such as what goes into saying 'Excuse me!' to a stranger on the sidewalk – 'is a stupefying example of, while Rome's burning, fiddling on one string, on one note' (Cooper 1972). A topic, interactional minutiae, combined with a determination to concentrate on interaction's social organisation and only that, was a focus that puzzled and sometimes infuriated critics.

Faced with complaints about such situational limitations of his sociology, Goffman acknowledged its marginal position. As he once provocatively stated about the nature of his own work: 'I make no claim whatsoever to be talking about the core matters of sociology – social organization and social structure' (Goffman 1974:14). Indeed, Goffman's work – no matter how it is twisted and turned by either epigones or critics—*is* primarily microsociological. Although Norman K. Denzin has once claimed that 'those who are preoccupied with turning [Goffman's] theory into another micro-model perhaps do the discipline a disservice' (Denzin 2002:111), Goffman's ideas *were* indeed microsociological and have predominantly found use in microsociological contexts. This, however, does not mean that his ideas cannot be used for other analytical purposes, but their groundwork *is* microsociology. In fact, Goffman did have generalizing ambitions, but he felt that theories and models of a general kind were still premature. Anthony Giddens thus rightly observed how Goffman 'deliberately avoided any sort of engagement with issues concerning the large scale or the long term' (Gid-

dens 1988:251). In his more critical review, Gouldner stated that Goffman's work is 'a social theory that dwells on the episodic and sees life only as it is lived in a narrow interpersonal circumference, ahistorical and noninstitutional, an existence beyond history and society' (Gouldner 1970:379). Goffman himself also willingly admitted the limitations of his own micro-perspective when he – in one of his few interviews – remarked:

> If you take a substantial institution like a mental hospital you could say that my treatment of the hospital was not seated in a historical perspective, nor, more damaging, did it deal much with the relationship between the mental hospital and the system of institutions of which it is an interdependent part … That failure is a characteristic of what I do and a weakness of it, although that is not to say that anybody is doing it well … I defend with no apology treating 'small entities' as my subject matter (Goffman in David 1980:7).

However, as mentioned, from this does not necessarily follow that Goffman's work might not have important implications for macro-scale theorizing. Many contemporary social theorists – perhaps particularly those concerned with grand theory-building projects – have drawn on and actively used parts of Goffman's ideas as important building blocks in their own abstract theorizing about modernity, society, class, communication, social change, gender, social order, and other predominantly macro-scale phenomena (think of Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu and others).

We thus suggest that Goffman's work might fruitfully be played against or integrated with such more macrosociological concerns. Let us provide an illustrative example. Few have addressed Goffman's implicit vision of social change – and the question remains if Goffman's largely situational microsociology is at all suitable for shedding light on the impact of some of the major social and cultural transformations. While some seem to point out that Goffman's stressing of the art of 'impression management' in encounters and meetings supports the thesis of the rise of an 'other-directed' personality type in modern society (Riesman, Glazer and Denney 1953/2001) obsessively concerned with the validation of self from others (Zussman 2001), others have rather seen Goffman as a protagonist of the rise of recognition claims and reciprocal courtesies in contemporary polite society (Jacobsen 2010b; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2009). Yet others, Marshall Berman for one, in his review of *Relations in Public* published in *The New York Times* in 1972, attempted to look beyond Goffman's somewhat stationary view and saw some disturbing signs for the future of society in his depictions of social relations:

If this is so, it forces us to face some disturbing questions about the breakthroughs of the sixties. For so many Americans these were years of unprecedented personal expression and political confrontation. In every sphere, we 'refused to keep our place', we broke boundaries, tore down walls, acted out what we felt, encouraged others to do the same. And where are we now? Goffman's final vision seems unrelievedly bleak. Life in the streets appears as a Hobbesian nightmare, life in the family an existential battleground. It seems terrifying both to go out and to stay in. And social life turns out to be far more fragile, more vulnerable than we thought (Berman 1972/2000:276).

Later, Lauren Langman followed Berman's lead and has suggested that:

Goffman's analyses of self-presentations and interaction rituals of everyday life, strategies of winning interpersonal and material games in the context of a culture of consumption, inform the nature of modern alienation … Commodified self-presentations and interaction rituals often can be seen as expressions of alienated selfhood, characteristic of today (Langman 1992:108-109).

The question thus arises if these sinister views of a 'commodified' and 'alienated' life and the 'Hobbesian nightmare', which Langman and Berman spotted in Goffman's microsociological writings, can be substantiated by real-life, macro-scale events. Some signs point in a direction that may support Berman's and Langman's bleak readings of Goffman – for example, how we apparently and increasingly have come to live in a society of the spectacle obsessed with surface identities, staged impressions and shallow images (e.g., on Facebook, Twitter and reality-TV shows), how 'life in the streets' may appear more dangerous than ever before (e.g., due to increasing crime rates, the threat of terrorism, and a concomitant tendency to become part of moral panics), and how many of the certainties and securities that guided generations before have now been either demolished or diluted (e.g., due to globalisation and financial crises), while many other developments admittedly point in quite the opposite direction.

Despite several attempts to read into Goffman's writings hidden political statements, critical potentials or diagnostical tendencies of a more general or macro-scale nature, it is, however, important to recognize that Goffman never ventured into presenting a timeless or universal model of social life, nor did he want to present a diagnosis of the times or a critical social theory. His aspirations were – some would say more modestly, others more ambitiously – to provide the discipline of sociology with a rich conceptual apparatus and a focused gaze with which to capture and comprehend those micro-aspects of social life, which until then had seemed either unimportant or incomprehensible. So contrary to, for example, Michel Foucault, who, armed with his archaeology of knowledge and genealogy, studied institutions –

the prison and the clinic and indeed society as such as a 'generalized prison' – in a historical context focusing on changing power relations, discourses, games of truth and regimes of knowledge, Goffman was content to provide a much more situational, inside view of the 'interaction order' existing *within* the mental hospital without turning it into a grand narrative of modernity or civilisation (Hacking 2004) – although he did in fact insist that the these traits of the 'total institution' might also be found in as diversified settings as schools, army barracks, and concentration camps.

What Goffman thus perhaps lacked in regard to analysing macro-social change and structural transformations he more than compensated for with his well-developed sense for descriptive detail and colourful and catching concepts when analysing the intricacies and minutiae of microsocial settings. Thus, as Robin Williams boldly observed in an obituary tribute to Goffman, his work met 'the most important requirements of modern social theory – to be self-conscious about the meaning of what it is to know' (Williams 1983:102). What Goffman wanted to investigate and obtain knowledge about was as mentioned the 'interaction order' and its contours, components and content as an analytical micro-domain in its own right.

The connections between the interaction order and other large-scale social orders were first sketched in the two essays making up *Encounters* (Goffman 1961b). Essentially Goffman here suggested that there is a kind of sifting and sorting of externally based attributes of the person (wealth, skills and knowledge, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) that allows only some to figure in face-to-face interaction. Other characteristics may be screened out or excluded. A metaphorical membrane surrounds the face-to face situation. Goffman argued that we take interaction roles in addition to regular social roles. In classic functionalist theory, institutions are composed of social statuses and roles involve the enactment of the norms (expectations and obligations) associated with the status. Role is thus the key term linking the individual to the relevant institutional framework. The interaction order exists 'below' the institutional framework. Some interactional roles, such as those linked to service queues, seem almost entirely creatures of the interaction order. Sometimes interactional roles overlap with institutional ones, where a parent talks to a child while a meal is prepared. On other occasions, people may use interactional roles to take 'role distance' from institutional roles, as when a member of a surgical team runs a line of banter with another surgeon during surgery. The idea Goffman develops is that people who engage in role distancing behaviours are not expressing their innate 'human' qualities, rather they are mobilising a role and identity alternative to the official ones.

In the posthumously published Presidential Address 'The Interaction Order', Goffman (1983) made a number of further suggestions about the interface between encounters and so-

cial structures and builds a more coherent model of how micro and macro are related, adopting the metaphor of 'loose coupling' to describe the link between social structures and interactional practices. .. Externally relevant characteristics may or may not be relevant to how actions are managed within the encounter. They cannot be assumed in advance. That means that the only general relation between the micro and macro levels of sociological analysis is one of 'loose coupling'. Unlike Tom Burns (1992:55), who reads Goffman's proposal as a claim that the macro-micro relation either does not exist or is 'unfathomable', we consider this model a positive formulation. It is *not* a theory of the macro-micro relation because Goffman regards the precise nature of the link to be a question that in specific instances requires empirical investigation. In specific cases, the relevance of ethnicity, class, gender, etc., has to be demonstrated and treated 'as a matter for discovery' (Goffman 1983:12). In this way, Goffman admittedly did not provide us with an elaborated view of how micro and macro connects, although he did indicate that the intricate links between the interaction order and other large-scale social orders needed our careful attention in our studies.

Goffman's 'interaction rituals': what about power?

It has been suggested that Goffman's concentration on the ritual aspects of the interaction order has meant he 'missed the other crucial dimension of social relationships, namely power, and therefore spun a lopsided and incomplete account of social behavior' (Kemper 2011:5). And true, large parts of Goffman's work on the interaction order consisted in teasing out its expansive network of micro-rules and micro-ritual (e.g. Cheal 1988). To call Goffman a 'major theorist of power' (Jenkins 2008), we believe, would therefore be an exaggerated characterisation. Certainly, Goffman was not a class-theorist in any conventional sense of the term (Gonos 1980), although a recognition of the significance of class is signalled by his first paper on class status symbols (Goffman 1951) and in the extensive mention of occupational status that is a conspicuous feature of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Boltanski 1973).

Power, it is often said, is a neglected feature of Goffman's sociology. This is not a new criticism, having been made as long ago as 1970 (Gouldner 1970), and it is a complaint that continues to be made by critics both unsympathetic (e.g. Tylor 2018) and sympathetic (e.g. Giddens 2009) to Goffman's enterprise. The term 'power' is, however, not entirely absent from Goffman's writings. While it is indeed not a core element of his conceptual vocabulary, he does, for example, mention the notion explicitly in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), his first book. In his discussion of 'teams' and 'teamwork', Goffman distinguishes between 'directive dominance', where someone in the team controls and directs the action, and 'dramatic dominance', where one team member can become the centre of attention

or star (see Goffman 1959:97-104). For example, at a wedding a minister will exercise directive dominance while the bride enjoys dramatic dominance:

> The conceptions of dramatic and directive dominance, as contrasting types of power in a performance, can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to an interaction as a whole, where it will be possible to point out which of the two teams has more of which of the two types of power and which performers, taking the participants of both teams all together, lead in these two regards (Goffman 1959:101).

However, Goffman did take an interest in power, albeit in a less than explicit manner. Clearly, power does not feature as a leading term in Goffman's lexicon, yet many of the key notions associated with it are embedded in his sociology. This much was noticed by Mary Rogers over forty years ago (Rogers 1977, 1980). Goffman's writings, Rogers shows, contain the elements of a coherent conception of power, influence and control that gainsay any simple criticism that his sociology ignores forms of power and hierarchy. Power, influence and control stem from Goffman's emphasis on the capacity for intentionality. An emphasis on the designed or calculative aspects of human action (in contrast to 'unmeant' or 'unwitting' forms) can found throughout his work, but is especially conspicuous in books like *Strategic Interaction* (1969) and *Frame Analysis* (1974). Goffman's theory of power is largely implicit, centring upon 'instrumental resources' such as social position and interpersonal skills (character, composure and the like) and also 'infra-resources' concerned with perceptions, information and access (Rogers 1980:102-106). Influence is built into Goffman's (1959:15) conception of face-to-face interaction as the 'reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate presence'. Control for Goffman is both a process (e.g. the remedial cycle) and an effect (where control of people stems from control of perceptions and definitions of the situation). Perhaps more contentiously, Rogers (1980:123) also argued that Goffman's claim that many expectations and obligations are shaped by 'habitual conventionality' points to a recognition of a nascent conception of false consciousness in his thinking. The deconstruction of that habitual conventionality that his sociology accomplishes might then be framed as a critical enterprise. The implied theory of power that Rogers identifies sets Goffman apart from Blumerian forms of symbolic interactionism and serves to neutralise blunter criticism about the neglect of power. Furthermore, Rogers' work begins to indicate the ways in which power works in ordinary interaction and also the ways in which interactional manifestations of power and influence can challenge and work against institutionalised forms of power. One could perhaps even argue that Goffman provides us with a

sociological specification of Foucault's concept of power, and that Rogers' reconstruction of the elements of Goffman's thinking about power shows how Foucault's ideas can be translated into a sociologically-workable set of concepts (Hacking 2004; Leib 2017).

Contrary to many critics, Richard Jenkins (2008) argues that Goffman does in fact have a coherent theory of power embedded in his sociology. Building on Rogers' ideas about Goffman's view of power as the mobilisation of differential access to resources, Jenkins suggests that information, territory and capacity to enact procedural forms are central to how Goffman conceives the exercise of power. What Jenkins disputes is what he sees as Goffman's limited general conception of how these resources are mobilised by interactants in encounters. The point at issue is Goffman's claim that there is a potential disconnection between the interaction order and larger social structures: that social structures are not simple aggregates of interaction, and that what transpires interactionally is not a simple or direct reflection of social structures. As Goffman starkly claimed:

> I do not believe that one can learn about the shape of the commodities market, or the distribution of a city's land values, or the ethnic succession in municipal administrations, or the structure of kinship systems, or the systematic phonological shifts within the dialects of a speech by extrapolating or aggregating from particular social encounters among the persons involved in any one of these patterns (Goffman 1983:9).

While, as Jenkins notes, this statement is true, he suggests that this stance leads to Goffman underselling his sociology by insulating it from its relevance for understanding a society's larger structural features. If one undertakes microanalysis of job selection interviews, for example, Jenkins claims we can arrive at an understanding of 'something significant about how the macro 'shape' of the labour market is produced and reproduced' (Jenkins 2008:166). Goffman would doubtless concur but insist upon observing the distinction between the situational (the encounter's procedural forms) and the merely situated (the encounter's effects). Indeed, in discussing 'people processing encounters', Goffman (1983:8) acknowledged how officially irrelevant structural attributes (race, class, gender and age are mentioned) can introduce a 'micro-dot of mystification' into the proceedings. It is the encounter's effects, merely situated matters such as the categories of person appointed to a job, that produce and reproduce the labour market, not the situational matters concerning, for example, how interviewers interpret the interviewee's demeanour in answering specific questions. In a sense, both Jenkins' and Goffman's points stand. If we want to understand how certain categories of people succeed in getting certain jobs, then attention to preferred forms of interview demeanour may

provide part of the explanation. But Goffman's equally telling point is that not *all* the features of a macrosociological phenomenon like a labour market can be derived inductively by aggregating what transpires in the actual job selection interview. There are some features of what transpires, for example, the extended relationship between buyer and seller of labour, or the right of the buyer of labour to set the wage for the job, which are not interactional effects but are set in law. What looks like defensiveness or underselling (Burns 1992, Jenkins 2008) could just as readily be regarded as Goffman's considered analytical caution.

Goffman's made the further suggestion that the effects of structure on interactional practices, or the effects of interactional practices on macrosociological phenomena, cannot be assumed or asserted by theoretical fiat but need to be demonstrated by empirical research of actual cases. As he stated: 'one is encouraged to treat as a matter for discovery just who it is that does what to whom' (Goffman 1983:10). This is a refreshing take on the micro-macro question because it implies that it is a mistake to seek generalised solutions to this question, in the manner say of Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens. Through these formulations we suggest that the wider theoretical problem that Goffman is addressing is the phenomenon of 'emergence': how social forms arise out of meaningful social practices (e.g., McHugh 1968). The solution he sketches is not one of a smooth and uniform process, but rather a formulation marked by discontinuity and rupture, and motivated by a wish to take a tough and sceptical look at what is actually happening in society's institutionalised structures. For Goffman, business dress may have become more casual, but the business world is much as it was; blacks and women have breached segregated public places, thereby changing access rules, but the structural or hierarchical situation of these categories of persons are not much changed.

Goffman's 'analytic attitude': what about politics?

As we mentioned earlier, Goffman, in his own words, was far more concerned with 'watching the snorers' than with awakening them from their apparently deep sleep (Goffman 1974:14), and he was also more interested in finding out if Marxist brushed their teeth in the morning than in providing dry wood for their ideological pyres (Ledger 1982:42).While Goffman never framed his sociology in political terms, it is worth considering aspects of his political attitudes prior to discussing wider questions about the critical potential of his sociology.

Not surprisingly, given Goffman's well-known efforts to preserve his incognito, data are scarce on this subject. One source of puzzlement about locating Goffman in the ideological universe stems from his early reputation as a novel and indeed radical thinker who – in particular through the impact of *Asylums* (1961a) and *Stigma* (1963) on audiences outside of sociology – cast fresh light on many overlooked features of everyday life and did so in a

manner sensitive to the iniquities and injustices manifested in and through the interaction order. Just as Goffman's standing as a major contemporary sociologist grew through the 1960s, so too did he acquire a reputation of tending towards the apolitical if not conservative in outlook. In those tumultuous times he often appeared to go out of his way to avoid direct political involvement. Goffman resisted pressures from colleagues to take anti-government positions by reminding them that he was a Canadian citizen (Taylor 1968:835). When the University of California at Berkeley became a major centre of student rebellion in the mid-sixties, Goffman had become a full professor. The Free Speech Movement ran a protest through the 1964-1965 academic year that soon became linked to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War struggles. Goffman avoided any involvement in campus political activism and seemed less supportive of student demands than other faculty members such as Herbert Blumer. When asked about his position during one crisis at Berkeley, he replied: 'When they start shooting students from the steps of Sproul Hall I guess I'll get involved, but not until then' (Marx 1984:658). Goffman was advertised as a speaker at 'The Dialectics of Liberation' conference held in London in 1967 (reported in *The New Statesman*, June 16, 1967, p. 850), along with such notable radical activists and thinkers as Lucien Goldmann, Paul Goodman, R. D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse and Paul Sweezy (Cooper 1968). It was a significant event, suffused with the late 1960s zeitgeist. There were even rumours that Jean-Paul Sartre would be making an appearance. In the event Goffman did not attend, apparently withdrawing – according to Gary T. Marx (1984) – when he heard that the conference organisers invited the Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael to speak. Whatever the reasons for Goffman's own withdrawal, his name on the posters indicated how many radicals situated his work, which they saw as in keeping with their concerns. Marx also recalls an exchange with a student quizzing Goffman about 'what's the use of it for changing the conditions you describe?'. Goffman responded: 'I'm not in that business' and quickly stormed out of the room (Marx 1984:657).

It is important to ask, was Goffman correct in this instant assessment, and more broadly, if not changing social conditions, what business was Goffman then in? He saw himself primarily as a sociologist with a conception of the critical task centred on changing people's thinking rather than any more openly engaged conceptions of the sociologist's social role. Against this image of the sociologist reluctant to become publicly involved in political action must be set some facts that seem to lead in the opposite direction. Goffman's intellectual networks included sociologists like Gouldner, who as mentioned earlier invited him to join the editorial board of *Theory and Society* when it was founded. In his dispute with the publisher about the cover image of the UK edition of the book *Gender Advertisements* (1979), Goffman was proud to remind the publisher of his sympathy for the social justice credentials of the

advisory editorial team (notably Paul Walton, whom he counted as a colleague and a friend) in whose series the book appeared. While Goffman's default position was to steer clear of any political involvements, he did give active support in 1970 for Thomas Szasz's initiative *American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization* (AAAIMH), which was one of the reasons why Goffman – together with the likes of Laing, Foucault and Szasz – was often described as 'anti-institutionalist'.

However, Goffman's general pessimism and scepticism about social arrangements are sharply evident in an address he gave to graduating students on the occasion he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Manitoba in 1976. According to a newspaper report, Goffman was reported as speaking of a world 'somewhat governed by aging idiots', observing that 'not even today have we learned how to make democracy safe for the world'. Student rebels were right about the institutions they criticised and the adults who staffed them, but they did not appreciate the 'strength of their weaknesses' and the rebellion fizzled out, ending 'not with a bang but in a boutique' as the demands of making a living were felt. The world was not better in the past – there were no 'good old days': 'every generation has whistled in the dark … but these are remorselessly informed times. More than your forebears you will have to forego whistling'. The decline of the 'prestige of class distinction' meant that social ambition was not the attractive goal it once seemed and with the fading of the prestige of class standing, people were now 'socially left to teeter'. Looking to his audience's futures, Goffman was downbeat. He told them: 'The only worlds left free for you to explore are those of the mind'. He recommended remaining clearheaded and curious. With that emphasis on the cultivation of their rational faculties, Goffman recommended students to quietly and tolerantly make do with the ills and imperfections of the society they faced. Small wonder the headline reporting his talk in the local newspaper glossed it as 'gloomy world forecast for grads' (Anon 1976).

The hope of ever reaching some conclusive and once-and-for-all assessment of Goffman's politics thus seems a doomed task, particularly, as Judith Posner once proposed, 'some view him as a political radical, others view him as a middle-class conservative; while others, like myself, view him as apolitical' (Posner 1978:71). Trying to establish Goffman's 'real' political position is, at the end of the day, a rather futile endeavour. Goffman would probably concur with the relativity of Sherri Cavan's statement: 'To people who were radical, he appeared quite conservative. To people who were conservative, he appeared to be radical, a rule breaker, an interpersonal anarchist' (Cavan 2014:65). With the passage of time and the shifts in the meaning of these political labels, questions of Goffman's politics seem of diminishing relevance to the assessment of his contribution and legacy. It seems true, though, that

Goffman's political impact came through his words more than his deeds. His critical task is sometimes described under the heading of a Burkean 'perspective by incongruity'. The arresting comparisons, the compelling metaphors, the sentences that provoke that 'look again' experience are all important textual dimensions of Goffman's critical practice together with his frequent use of sarcasm, humour, powerful metaphors and an insincere self-effacement suggesting to his readers that what he is saying is really not all that important (Smith and Jacobsen 2010). The writings convey clear underdog sympathies – for hospitalised mental patients (in *Asylums*) as well as for those similarly troubled 'in the community' (in 'The Insanity of Place'). Kindred readings are often made of *Stigma* (Goffman 1963). Moreover, in the 1970s Goffman's 'low-burning feminism' (Gonos 1980:168n) turned into stronger support for feminist agendas, fuelled in part by the feminist interests of his students at the University of Pennsylvania.

In the last of the words Goffman knew would be published, his aforementioned undelivered Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, he urged sociologists who needed to justify their work in terms of social needs to study those occupying positions of authority of all kinds who 'give official imprint to versions of reality' (Goffman 1983:17). Goffman's underdog sympathies were achieved not by the imposition of an explicit moral agenda or an already formulated partisan position but through careful observation of the ordinary situations people face and a command of language that Goffman carefully cultivated to express what he saw. Importantly, in his Presidential Address, Goffman prefaced the statement just cited about 'studying up' those who give official imprint to reality with a remark that makes it clear that sociology can exist without calls to uphold particular values such as social needs or social justice. So there is a second message to add to the one about studying up, and it runs in the opposite direction to the first. As sociologists, Goffman believes we are entitled to study society 'because it is there' and because historically, 'only in modern times have university students been systematically trained to examine all levels of social life meticulously', without reference to the demands of religion or tradition. Some may think that sociology has not achieved a great deal so far as a discipline, but it has achieved something historically important, namely, 'the bent to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry, and the wisdom not to look elsewhere but ourselves and our discipline for this mandate. That is our inheritance and that so far is what we have to bequeath' (Goffman 1983:17).

If Goffman's sociology in certain respects seems apolitical, it was a robust, considered position, rooted in a conception of sociology suspicious of all forms of partisanship. While not openly oppositional, it embraced the critical use of irony, a key part of the 'Chicago habi-

tus' (Winkin 1999:34-35) that Goffman absorbed as a graduate student in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The key idea was not to be co-opted – either by sociological theory or by the group under study. In the exploration of these ideas we can find the basis of Goffman's analytic attitude and critical theory. Goffman was the classic example of the sociologist as a 'licensed voyeur' (Taylor 1968:865) in thrall to the act of observation. But as Berger (1973:354) suggested in writing of Goffman's 'demonic detachment', his descriptions express a 'strong sense of decency and propriety' and are 'least compromised by moral posturings, knowing leers or other vulgar ego trips'. Goffman's skill at articulating the taken for granted aspects of interactants' intuitions is remarkable. It rests in part on the absence of partisanship in Goffman's analyses – as T. R. Young stated: 'Goffman neither celebrates the priest nor castigates the prostitute'. Agreeing with Gouldner that Goffman's sociology lacks a 'metaphysics of hierarchy', Young (1971:276) insists, however, that 'the points of view of psychiatrists, salesmen, professors and police have no prior moral claim on the loyalty of the sociologist than do the points of view of the patient, the customer, the student or the criminal'. Goffman thus anticipated the notion of ethnomethodological indifference and kindred interpretive stances that seek to preserve the interactant's perspective (Jacobsen 2010a:12).

However, Goffman was not only a great observer of social life. Another feature of his analytic attitude was the capacity to mobilise his own everyday experience into his writings in a sociologically effective way. Observation was the gold standard for Goffman, and it might include not only formally organised stints of fieldwork but also observations and reflections made in the course of the daily round. Philip M. Strong (1983) expressed this idea as a neat slogan: 'you too can treat your own life as data'. Goffman thus led the way in the 1960s and 1970s towards new methods for the collection of sociological data that nowadays travel under the colourful headings of 'autoethnography', 'innovative methods' and 'self-analysis'.

Conclusion

Erving Goffman was an enigmatic and iconoclastic sociologist, a 'crossover writer' (Menand 2009:296). Like all good crossover writers, Goffman can be set in many contexts and framed in many different ways. Indeed, Goffman did not merely make a virtue out of this chameleon-like feature of his work – he turned it into a theory of the social organisation of experience (Goffman 1974). In this chapter we have explored aspects of the doubts frequently expressed about Goffman's sociology in order to better understand the diversity of his sociological contribution and the directions his ideas have inspired.

The purpose of this chapter has thus been to excavate and explore some of the critical potential in the work of Goffman. Even though Goffman is most often read and depicted as an

apolitical microsociologist with no genuine understanding of power or social conflict, this chapter has critically engaged with some of these 'misgivings' about Goffman. This has been done by outlining his perspective on the topics of social structure, power and politics. It was shown that Goffman in fact does touch upon these issues in his work on the 'interaction order' either explicitly or more implicitly. We can then conclude that although Goffman did not pay any particular or sustained attention to such topics (at least not compared to many other sociologists writing during his time), he nevertheless provided the discipline of sociology with some insights into the themes of social structure, power and politics that subsequent interpreters and users of his work have been able to elaborate and expand on.

This also means that new generations of sociologists can find and indeed have found in the work of Goffman suggestions and leads for a critical understanding of the interaction order and of how subordination, domination and power works interactionally. Here we could mention some of the work done recently on stigma and disability studies (e.g., Link and Phelan 2014; Brune and Garland-Thomson 2013), on gender differences (West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009; West 1996) or on race and so-called 'racialized interaction orders' (Rawls 2000; Rawls and Duck 2017; Rosino 2017). Although we are here unable to address all these studies and the many others around, we think that their very presence, in itself, testifies to Goffman's critical potential. With this chapter the last word has obviously not been said about Erving Goffman's view on social structure, power or politics, as we are sure the interest in and investigation of these topics will continue unabated in years to come.

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